

MILITARY POLICE OPERATIONS IN IRAQ— COMMAND VERSUS SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS

By Colonel Richard Swengros

The struggle for command and control (C2) is many times one of the most difficult parts of finalizing an operations plan. At the heart of C2 relationships is the question of whether a supported commander is best served by having a support relationship or a command relationship with some of the technical branches allocated to the operation.

As much as maneuver leaders have trouble with “not owning” everything in their battlespace, the supporting units have trouble conducting their full-spectrum operations piecemeal across an area of operations. At the center of the discussion is the maneuver commander’s feeling that the support he/she is receiving is exactly the support necessary to accomplish the mission. Just as important is the assurance that the full expertise of supporting battalion and brigade commanders and their staffs resonates in the mission set for the operation so that all supporting elements operate in a synchronized manner across the battlespace in support of the maneuver commander. This article is not about who was right or wrong. It captures what the military police commanders observed as they entered the fight in Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom and describes the methodology used in developing the military police C2 relationships in Iraq that enabled military police to jump-start the Iraqi Police Partnership Program in a synchronized and fully integrated manner across central and northern Iraq.

Initial Command and Control of Military Police Units in Iraq

At the mission rehearsal exercise (MRE) before deployment, senior commander mentors received briefings from both the 42d and 18th Military Police Brigades. Part of the briefing included a review of the C2 relationships that were currently in the theater. One structure had a brigade under the tactical control (TACON) of a task force (TF), while one of the brigade’s subordinate battalions with its subordinate companies was also separately under the TACON of the same TF. Of the companies not working in the detention business, all but three were under the operational control (OPCON) of maneuver commanders, typically brigade commanders. One element was in a direct-support relationship and had very little contact with its military police higher headquarters. There were military police battalion and

brigade commanders with OPCON of very few military police assets and therefore could not accomplish the military police support mission nor the numerous other corps general-support missions that had to be routinely accomplished. It was during this briefing that the senior commander mentors initiated a discussion with senior leaders from XVIII Airborne Corps on support versus C2 relationships. The senior commander mentors proposed that senior corps leaders should assess how they were going to use critically short assets, such as the military police. The senior commander mentors feared that field commanders were apparently moving away from establishing support relationships between Army units.

Upon arrival in Iraq, the brigade leaders found that military police missions were general in nature, such as “provide support” for the main military police functions. There were very few specific missions in the mission statement, especially at the battalion and brigade levels. Almost all the military police brigade’s assets were task-organized to other units. The brigade leaders also found that the Iraqi police development efforts were not synchronized and that numerous seams were present throughout the area of operations. Iraqi police equipment distribution did not follow any specific priority and much of the equipment was substandard and was not used. The brigade leaders found that the Iraqis were not in step with the brigade’s efforts. In fact, they were dismayed by the poor quality of equipment, the variations of station capabilities being developed, and the improper prioritization of support given to their stations.

The brigade leaders also observed that some maneuver commanders ordered military police battalion commanders to stay out of their area of responsibility (AOR) and prohibited some company commanders from visiting their platoons without specific permission. Some military police company commanders were forbidden to report events through

organic military police command channels or discuss operations or other issues with their parent organizations. For no logical reason, others were kept from leaving their forward operating base or from working in particular areas with the Iraqi police.

Finally, from a policing aspect, brigade leaders had to find a way to try to synchronize police operations across the battlespace. There were significant seams of policing activity across the AOR and terrorists, insurgents, and criminals were operating relatively freely within these seams. We also had battalion, brigade, and division boundaries that crossed Iraqi police and government boundaries which created even more seams. Even in the police business, seams allow criminals the opportunity to operate and, in Iraq, the terrorists, insurgents, and criminals took advantage of this. There was no one looking across the AOR and working to mitigate this important development, and the brigade needed to address this in its solution set.

From the standpoint of the brigade commander, two things had to change. First, the military police missions had to be adjusted. The military police senior commanders (battalion and brigade) did not have specific missions that used their expertise as 20-year police veterans. These commanders had to get involved in the mission support provided to the maneuver commanders. The expertise of these commanders and their staffs was too great to leave on the operational sidelines. Second, the synchronization in providing support to the Iraqi police had to be improved if long-term progress and development were to be realized. The best way to see Iraqi police improvement would be to get all military police resources involved in the fight for improvement so that the Iraqi police could conduct operations in the hostile environment they were experiencing.

Support Relationships

On one point there is no argument—the military police are a support entity whose priority mission must be to support the maneuver commanders. While everyone agrees with that precept, the ways it is approached are diverse. Much of the common friction centers on C2. As early as the MRE in October 2004, senior XVIII Airborne Corps leaders and the senior commander mentors at the exercise tasked subordinate commands to look at the C2 relationships and consider establishing support relationships for critically short assets such as military police units.

Support relationships do two important things for the major supported commander. First, the supporting unit brings its expertise into total support of the

supported commander's intent. Second, the supporting commander can be much more adaptive and agile in providing support across the spectrum of operations in the AOR. When key assets such as military police are critically short, a support relationship allows the critically short asset to be more flexible in conducting operations and maximizing its resources. The ability of a unit to influence the technical aspects of operations is also greater in a support relationship than in an OPCON relationship. In support relationships, the supported unit essentially receives the entire package of expertise available within the supporting unit. When units are task-organized into smaller elements and placed in a command relationship, the supported unit receives only the expertise that resides within the command structure supporting the unit. When maneuver commanders are asked whether they want the advice and support of a company commander or a battalion commander, their answer typically is, "The senior military police commander—the battalion commander." The support relationship provides a greater capability to ensure that the correct level of advice and expertise is provided to the supported commander.

Sometimes military police can be their own worst enemy in the C2 venue because they—

- Do not understand their true support role.
- Fail to ensure that everything they do directly supports the supported commander's intent within the space where they operate.

Even in a general-support role, the supporting unit has a responsibility to ensure that the activities it is conducting support not only its higher headquarters, but also the supported maneuver commander.

In Iraq, the January 2005 elections period demonstrated the brigade staff's ability to effect police support within the framework of the maneuver commander (the 1st Cavalry Division commander). The division commander understood that military police assets were critically short across the theater and that the policing efforts were not well synchronized. That created seams where terrorists, insurgents, and criminals could operate. As the brigade began to work through the partnership program, its success quickly grew.

Major General William Webster and his 3d Infantry Division commanders followed the 1st Cavalry Division into the theater and continued to work with the military police battalions and brigade in the nonspecified command relationship. It soon became evident that the maneuver commander was better served by releasing military police units back

to military police battalion and brigade control to conduct and synchronize the technical aspects of the police support mission. Using this precept, the XVIII Airborne Corps published an order giving the 42d Military Police Brigade the mission to conduct police operations in support of maneuver commanders. This was soon followed by an order to release military police companies from their OPCON role under the maneuver brigades to their organic C2 relationship with their parent military police battalions. To make this new relationship most successful, the supporting military police elements had to realize that their—

- Role was to support the maneuver commander in the battlespace they were assigned.
- Units should not do anything inside the maneuver commander's battlespace without being totally synchronized with his/her efforts, intent, and priorities.

I credit the success of the military police to the company commanders, platoon and squad leaders, and the staffs for really understanding the support role. Coordination by leaders at all levels was key to mission success, from the division provost marshal and the military police brigade staff, to the coordination inside the division's effects cell, to the coordination by squad and platoon leaders with the maneuver company tactical operation centers. Any different arrangement would have spelled disaster in several areas and risked the safety of Soldiers of both units. In support relationships, military police senior leaders were able to apply military police resources more quickly and effectively to areas in support of maneuver commanders than would have been possible previously. In the support role, military police could maximize technical capabilities and partnership efforts with the Iraqi police to effect security and operations for the maneuver commander. I told the military police leaders that if the maneuver commander did not feel his/her supporting military police were an organic part of his/her unit, then the military police had failed in the support concept. Military police were successful in this mission because they understood the need to support the maneuver commander as the

partnership and maneuver support missions continued. The maneuver commander received a quick, responsive, robust, technical, and professional support force that had the expertise of the entire military police command focused on ensuring the success of the police support operation and ensuring support to the overall concept of security operations.

If, at the end of the operation, a maneuver commander feels that he/she should have owned the military police to conduct the operations, then the military police failed in their support relationship at the senior military police levels (either at the battalion or brigade level). This is not to say that military police should never be task-organized in an attached or OPCON relationship. There are circumstances, especially in direct combat operations, in which these temporary relationships are appropriate.

Conclusion

The success of the 42d Military Police Brigade in Iraq was not only the result of super Soldiers executing complex missions. It was also the product of developing support relationships and the resulting synchronization, agility, and adaptability of military police support to both the corps and the maneuver commanders. Having the entire military police battalion and brigade capabilities supporting the maneuver commanders (brigade and higher) throughout Iraq brought significant dividends to the police support mission and to the overall maneuver support mission of the military police. No longer were maneuver commanders concerned that the military police were running around aimlessly or disconnected from their units and efforts. The support relationship allowed the military police commanders to support the maneuver commanders in their missions while simultaneously conducting corps general-support missions and closing seams between Iraqi police boundaries. When the military police use the full expertise of military police battalion and brigade commanders and their staffs in an operation, they have the best chance to quickly and effectively establish conditions that higher headquarters is looking for in its concept of operation.

Colonel Swengros entered the Army in August 1976. After serving six years as a military policeman in various team and squad leader positions in Germany, he attended the Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he was commissioned in June 1982. He has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from St. Martin's College and a master's degree in organizational systems from Pacific Lutheran University. Colonel Swengros assumed his current position as assistant commandant of the U.S. Army Military Police School on 8 February 2006.